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Japanese jazz

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Japanese jazz is **jazz** played by Japanese musicians and connected to **Japan** or **Japanese culture**. The term often refers to the history of jazz in Japan, which has the largest proportion of jazz fans in the world, according to some estimates.^[1] Attempts at fusing jazz with Japanese culture in the United States are commonly termed **Asian-American jazz**.

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History of jazz in Japan [edit source]

Jazz music first became popular in Japan following visits by bands from both America and the Philippines, where American popular music had been introduced by the occupying forces.^[2]

The **Hatano Jazz Band** is sometimes described as the first Japanese jazz band,^[3] although they were primarily a **dance band**.^[4] The Hatano band, which was created in 1912 by graduates from **Tokyo Music School**,^[5] absorbed and performed American dance music after traveling to San Francisco,^[6] but their music did not claim to feature jazz improvisation.^[7]

Local jazz practice, built around the performances of visiting Filipinos, began to emerge in the early 1920s, most notably in the prosperous entertainment districts of **Osaka** and **Kobe**. By 1924, the city of Osaka already boasted twenty dance halls, which gave many Japanese-born musicians an opportunity to play jazz professionally.^[8] Trumpeter **Fumio Nanri** (1910–1975) was the first of these Japanese jazz performers to gain international acclaim for his playing style. In 1929 Nanri traveled to **Shanghai**, where he played with **Teddy Weatherford**, and in 1932 he toured in the United States. After his return to Japan, Nanri made several recordings with his Hot Peppers, an American-style *swing* band.^[9]

The "Americanness" and mass appeal of early jazz as dance music gave reason for concern among the conservative Japanese elite, and in 1927 Osaka municipal officials issued ordinances that forced the dance halls to close. A large number of young musicians switched to the jazz scene in **Tokyo**, where some found employment in the house jazz orchestras of the major recording companies.^[10] In the 1930s, popular song composers **Ryoichi Hattori** and **Koichi Sugii** tried to overcome jazz music's controversial qualities by creating a distinctively Japanese kind of jazz music. They reworked ancient Japanese folk or theatre songs with a jazz touch, and in addition wrote new jazz songs that had Japanese thematic content and often closely resembled well-known traditional melodies.^[11] In 1933 Chigusa, Japan's surviving oldest jazz cafe, or ***jazu kissa***, opened in **Yokohama**.^[12]^[13] Since then, jazz coffeehouses have provided a popular alternative to the dance hall, offering the latest jazz records (while occasionally also hosting live performances) to an attentively listening audience.^[14]

Hattori's songs, however, flirted with controversy, most notably in his 1940 *Shortage Song* (タリナイ・ソング , *Tarinai songu*), which he wrote for **Tadaharu Nakano's** Rhythm Boys. Satirizing the shortages of food and material then widespread in Japan, the song drew the ire of government censors and was quickly banned.^[15] The controversy was among the factors that led to the Rhythm Boys' breakup in 1941.

During **World War II**, jazz was considered "enemy music" and banned in Japan. However, by then the genre had become far too popular for a complete ban to be successful. Jazz-like songs, sometimes of a strongly patriotic type, continued to be performed, though these songs were usually referred to as "**light music**."^[16] After the war, the Allied Occupation (1945–1952) of Japan provided a new incentive for Japanese jazz musicians to emerge, as the American troops were eager to hear the music they listened to back home. Pianist **Toshiko Akiyoshi** (born 1929) arrived in Tokyo in 1948, determined to become a professional jazz musician. After having formed the Cozy Quartet she was then noticed by **Hampton Hawes**, who was stationed in **Yokohama** with his military band, and brought to the attention of **Oscar Peterson**. Akiyoshi studied at **Berklee College of Music** in Boston in 1956, and later achieved worldwide success as a bop pianist and big band leader.^[17]

By the end of the 1950s, native jazz practice again flourished in Japan, and in the following decades an active **free jazz** scene reached its full growth. Critic Teruto Soejima considered 1969 as a pivotal year for Japanese free jazz, with musicians such as drummer **Masahiko Togashi**, guitarist **Masayuki Takayanagi**, pianists **Yosuke Yamashita** and **Masahiko Satoh**, saxophonist **Kaoru Abe**, bassist **Motoharu Yoshizawa**, and trumpeter **Itaru Oki** playing a major role.^[18] Other Japanese jazz artists who acquired international reputations include **Sadao Watanabe** (the former soloist of Akiyoshi's Cozy Quartet), **Ryo Kawasaki**, **Teruo Nakamura** (musician), **Toru "Tiger" Okoshi** and **Makoto Ozone**. Most of these musicians have toured extensively in the United States and some have moved there permanently for a career in jazz performance or education.^[19]

Jazz and Japanese culture [edit source]

Japanese jazz had frequently been criticized as derivative, or even as an unworthy imitation of U.S. jazz, both by American and Japanese commentators. In response to the belittling attitude of their audience, Japanese jazz artists began adding a "national flavor" to their work in the 1960s.^[20] Expatriate **Toshiko Akiyoshi** drew on Japanese culture in compositions for the **big band** she co-led with her husband and long-term collaborator **Lew Tabackin**. On ***Kogun*** (1974) they first utilized traditional instruments, such as the *tsuzumi*, and ***Long Yellow Road*** (1975) features an adaptation of a melody from the Japanese tradition of court music ("Children in the Temple Ground").^[21] Inspired by the analogies Akiyoshi presented to him between jazz music and **Zen Buddhism**, jazz writer William Minor has suggested that a Zen aesthetic can be perceived in the music of **Masahiko Satoh** and other Japanese jazz artists.^[22]

Recent developments [edit source]

See also: ***Shibuya-kei***

2000s [edit source]

Around the turn of the millennium, Tokyo remained the base for a small but thriving jazz community.^[23] Jazz singer and pianist **Ayado Chie** managed to reach out to a larger audience (both in Japan and internationally) with her emulation of black American vocal jazz.^[24] In 2004, **Blue Note Records** released an album by 17-year-old mainstream and bop pianist **Takashi (Matsunaga)** featuring his own compositions, *Storm Zone*. Takashi's most recent CD is titled *Love Makes the Earth Float* (2008).^[25]^[26]

In 2005 Japanese jazz group **Soil & "Pimp" Sessions** released their full-length debut *Pimp Master*, with tracks of the album gaining attention from DJs abroad and they began to receive heavy air-play on **Gilles Peterson's** Worldwide radio program on BBC Radio 1 in the UK.^[27] This got the album released in Europe on Compost and in UK on Peterson's **Brownswood Recordings** and subsequent albums by Soil & Pimp got released on Brownswood, making them arguably the most popular club jazz band to come out of Japan.

Osaka based quartet **Indigo jam unit** have released eleven original and four cover albums since their debut with the album *Demonstration* in 2006^[28]^[29]^[30]^[31] and have been described as a tight and energetic mix between a traditional jazz sound and **nu jazz** with distinctive beats and flowing jazz piano.^[32] After releasing their 11th album *Lights* in 2015, they announced that they would break up in summer of the following year.^[33]

Jazz pianist **Hiromi Uehara** has received worldwide recognition since her debut in 2003 with *Another Mind*, which was a critical success in North America and in her native Japan, where the album shipped gold (100,000 units) and received the Recording Industry Association of Japan's (RIAJ) **Jazz Album of the Year Award**. In 2009, she recorded with pianist **Chick Corea** *Duet*, a two-disc live recording of their transcendent, transgenerational and transcultural duo concert in Tokyo. She also appeared on bassist **Stanley Clarke's** Heads Up International release, *Jazz in the Garden*, which also featured former Chick Corea bandmate, drummer **Lenny White**.^[34] In 2011 Hiromi started her piano trio project, The Trio Project with **Anthony Jackson** and **Simon Phillips** and has released four albums under the name of this project.^[35] Recently not only does she play with jazz musicians but also she collaborates with notable J-pop musicians and bands and orchestras such as **Akiko Yano**, **Dreams Come True**, **Tokyo Ska Paradise Orchestra**, and **New Japan Philharmonic**.^[36]

The pianist **Makoto Ozone** has collaborated with the prize-winning singer **Kimiko Itoh**.^[37]

2010s [edit source]

Influenced by modern jazz in America that utilizes odd meters and rhythmic and harmonic elements of **Hip hop**, **R&B**, and **Neo soul**, the sound of Japanese jazz has become more musically complicated and diverse. The bands and artists that represent those new sounds includes **MEGAPTERAS**, **Yasei Collective**, Shun Ishiwaka(石若駿 , **Mononkul** and **Takuya Kuroda**. While modern jazz sound is becoming mainstream in the music scene, there are still some jazz musicians who play traditional styles of jazz such as **Bebop**, **Hard bop**, and **post-bop**.

In 2012, jazz pianist **Ai Kuwabara**, whose style is described as post-**Hiromi Uehara**, released her first album *from here to there*. Five years later, she recorded *somehow, someday, somewhere*, in which Ai collaborated with American jazz drummer **Steve Gadd** and bassist **Will Lee**.^[38]

Shun Ishiwaka, jazz drummer and composer, has received huge recognition in Japan because of his incomparable technique and cutting-edge sound and been a part of many recordings and projects with notable musicians such as **Terumasa Hino**, **Tokyo New City Orchestra**, **Taylor McFerrin**, and **Jason Moran**. Shun released his debut album *Cleanup* in 2015 in which he combined elements of contemporary *classical music*, *hip hop*, and *straight ahead jazz* and this album received "Album of the year new star praise" and "Jazz album of the year 2015" from Japan's two biggest jazz magazines *Jazz Japan* and *Jazz life* respectively.^[39] In 2016, Shun had a concert with his own trio having guitarist **Kurt Rosenwinkel** as a guest at **Blue Note Tokyo**.^[40]

Ryo Fukui, a now deceased jazz pianist who, in life, struggled to achieve recognition outside of Japan, experienced a monumental rise in popularity thanks to streaming platforms like **YouTube Music**, **Spotify**, and others. His most notable work, 1976's "**Scenery**" is now the most widely consumed Japanese Jazz album on YouTube, having accrued nearly 10 million views as of July 2020. This has led to his albums being reprinted for commercial sale, some of which even using the original studio tapes from 1976, and **mastered in half speed**.

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- Kids on the Slope**

See also [edit source]

Pit Inn - jazz club in Shinjuku, Tokyo

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External links [edit source]

- A Choice of Openness: Michael Pronko on Jazz in Japan
- Michael Pronko's own website on jazz in Japan
- Beppu/Oita Club Event Listing (Japanese language only)
- Patlotch Pictures, Music, Links, French Text

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